

**FINE POWDERS FOR USE IN
PRIMARY AND SECONDARY BATTERIES**

Inventor

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

The present invention relates to fine powders useful for primary and secondary batteries and to methods for producing such powders, as well as products and devices incorporating the powders. The powders are preferably produced by a spray conversion process.

2. Description of Related Art

Many primary (non-rechargeable and disposable) and secondary (rechargeable) batteries commonly utilize fine powders of an electrode material, such as LiCoO_2 , LiNiO_2 and LiMn_2O_4 . Such powders should have one or more of the following properties: high purity; controlled crystallinity; small average particle size; narrow particle size distribution; spherical particle morphology; controlled surface chemistry; controlled surface area; and little or no agglomeration of particles.

With the advent of portable and hand-held electronic devices and an increasing demand for electric automobiles due to the increased strain on natural resources there is a need for rapid development of high performance, economical power systems. Such power systems require improved means for energy storage.

Electrodes used for such applications should have a high surface area to enhance the energy and power density capabilities of the battery. For these applications, powders of electrode component materials are deposited over a large surface area and are typically impregnated with an electrode light.

To enhance the surface area it is desired that the powder component materials be finally divided and of a relatively narrow particle size distribution. Porous particles are desirable because they provide a large surface area to volume ratio. Similarly, wide distribution of particle sizes have a significant deleterious affect on energy density of the

cell. Agglomeration of the particles should also be avoided.

Finely divided powders have been difficult to obtain and to deposit with control over layer thickness and uniformity. For preparation of powders of cathode component materials conventional thermal processing followed by grinding and classification is commonly used. Even after heat treatment and grinding, the conversion may be substantially incomplete and the particle size of the product may be undesirable.

U.S. Patent No. 5,648,057 by Ueda et al. discloses a method for producing lithium compounds in the form of powders that are useful for battery electrodes. The method includes the steps of reacting metal salts to form a slurry, drying the slurry and heating the resulting residue in an oxidative atmosphere.

U.S. Patent No. 5,589,300 by Fauteux et al. discloses an aerosol process for producing a precursor capable of being converted into a component of an electrode, such as LiMn_2O_4 .

The foregoing methods generally result in poor control over the composition and microstructure of the powders. The inability to control the fundamental powder characteristics is a major shortcoming for the future development and improvement of secondary and primary batteries.

It would be advantageous to provide a flexible production method capable of producing fine battery powders which would enable control over the powder characteristics as well as the versatility to accommodate compositions which are either difficult or impossible to produce using existing production methods. It would be advantageous to provide control over the particle size, particle size distribution crystallinity, surface area of the powder, pore structure of the powder and compositional uniformity. It would be particularly advantageous if such powders could be produced in large quantities on a substantially continuous basis.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Fig. 1 is a process block diagram showing one embodiment of the process of the present invention.

Fig. 2 is a side view in cross section of one embodiment of aerosol generator of the

present invention.

Fig. 3 is a top view of a transducer mounting plate showing a 49 transducer array for use in an aerosol generator of the present invention.

Fig. 4 is a top view of a transducer mounting plate for a 400 transducer array for use
5 in an ultrasonic generator of the present invention.

Fig. 5 is a side view of the transducer mounting plate shown in Fig. 4.

Fig. 6 is a partial side view showing the profile of a single transducer mounting receptacle of the transducer mounting plate shown in Fig. 4.

Fig. 7 is a partial side view in cross-section showing an alternative embodiment for
10 mounting an ultrasonic transducer.

Fig. 8 is a top view of a bottom retaining plate for retaining a separator for use in an aerosol generator of the present invention.

Fig. 9 is a top view of a liquid feed box having a bottom retaining plate to assist in retaining a separator for use in an aerosol generator of the present invention.

Fig. 10 is a side view of the liquid feed box shown in Fig. 9.

Fig. 11 is a side view of a gas tube for delivering gas within an aerosol generator of the present invention.

Fig. 12 shows a partial top view of gas tubes positioned in a liquid feed box for distributing gas relative to ultrasonic transducer positions for use in an aerosol generator
20 of the present invention.

Fig. 13 shows one embodiment for a gas distribution configuration for the aerosol generator of the present invention.

Fig. 14 shows another embodiment for a gas distribution configuration for the aerosol generator of the present invention.

Fig. 15 is a top view of one embodiment of a gas distribution plate/gas tube assembly of the aerosol generator of the present invention.

Fig. 16 is a side view of one embodiment of the gas distribution plate/gas tube assembly shown in Fig. 15.

Fig. 17 shows one embodiment for orienting a transducer in the aerosol generator
30 of the present invention.

Fig. 18 is a top view of a gas manifold for distributing gas within an aerosol generator of the present invention.

Fig. 19 is a side view of the gas manifold shown in Fig. 18.

Fig. 20 is a top view of a generator lid of a hood design for use in an aerosol generator of the present invention.

Fig. 21 is a side view of the generator lid shown in Fig. 20.

Fig. 22 is a process block diagram of one embodiment of the process of the present invention including a droplet classifier.

Fig. 23 is a top view in cross section of an impactor of the present invention for use in classifying an aerosol.

Fig. 24 is a front view of a flow control plate of the impactor shown in Fig. 23.

Fig. 25 is a front view of a mounting plate of the impactor shown in Fig. 23.

Fig. 26 is a front view of an impactor plate assembly of the impactor shown in Fig. 23.

Fig. 27 is a side view of the impactor plate assembly shown in Fig. 26.

Fig. 28 is a process block diagram of one embodiment of the present invention including a particle cooler.

Fig. 29 is a top view of a gas quench cooler of the present invention.

Fig. 30 is an end view of the gas quench cooler shown in Fig. 29.

Fig. 31 is a side view of a perforated conduit of the quench cooler shown in Fig. 29.

Fig. 32 is a side view showing one embodiment of a gas quench cooler of the present invention connected with a cyclone.

Fig. 33 is a process block diagram of one embodiment of the present invention including a particle coater.

Fig. 34 is a block diagram of one embodiment of the present invention including a particle modifier.

Fig. 35 shows cross sections of various particle morphologies of some composite particles manufacturable according to the present invention.

Fig. 36 is a block diagram of one embodiment of the process of the present invention including the addition of a dry gas between the aerosol generator and the

furnace.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

The present invention is generally directed to fine battery powders and methods for
5 producing fine battery powders. The invention is also directed to novel devices fabricated
using the powders. As used herein, fine battery powders or battery particles are those that
are useful as an active component of an electrode in a primary or secondary battery.
Specific examples of such powders are listed in more detail below.

In one aspect, the present invention provides a method for preparing a particulate
10 product including an active battery material. A feed of liquid-containing, flowable medium,
including at least one precursor for the desired particulate product, is converted to aerosol
form, with droplets of the medium being dispersed in and suspended by a carrier gas.
Liquid from the droplets in the aerosol is then removed to permit formation in a dispersed
state of the desired particles. In one embodiment, the particles can be subjected, while still
15 in a dispersed state, to compositional or structural modification such as crystallization,
recrystallization or morphological alteration of the particles. The term powder is often used
herein to refer to the particulate product of the present invention. The use of the term
powder does not indicate, however, that the particulate product must be dry or in any
particular environment. Although the particulate product is typically manufactured in a dry
20 state, the particulate product may, after manufacture, be placed in a wet environment, such
as in a paste or slurry.

The process of the present invention is particularly well suited for the production of
finely divided particles having a small weight average size. In addition to making particles
within a desired range of weight average particle size, the particles may advantageously
25 be produced with a narrow size distribution, thereby providing size uniformity that is desired
for many applications. In addition, the method of the present invention provides significant
flexibility for producing particles of varying composition, crystallinity, morphology and
microstructure.

Referring now to Fig. 1, one embodiment of the process of the present invention is
30 described. A liquid feed 102, including the precursor for the desired particles, and a carrier

gas 104 are fed to an aerosol generator 106 where an aerosol 108 is produced. The aerosol 108 is then fed to a furnace 110 where liquid in the aerosol 108 is removed to produce particles 112 that are dispersed in and suspended by gas exiting the furnace 110. The particles 112 are then collected in a particle collector 114 to produce a particulate product 116.

As used herein, the liquid feed 102 is a feed that includes one or more flowable liquids as the major constituent(s), such that the feed is a flowable medium. The liquid feed 102 need not comprise only liquid constituents. The liquid feed 102 may comprise only constituents in one or more liquid phase, or it may also include particulate material suspended in a liquid phase. The liquid feed 102 must, however, be capable of being atomized to form droplets of sufficiently small size for preparation of the aerosol 108. Therefore, if the liquid feed 102 includes suspended particles, those particles should be relatively small in relation to the size of droplets in the aerosol 108. Such suspended particles should typically be not larger than about 1 μm in size, preferably not larger than about 0.5 μm in size, and more preferably not larger than about 0.3 μm in size and most preferably not larger than about 0.1 μm in size. Most preferably, the suspended particles should be colloidal. The suspended particles could be finely divided particles, or could be agglomerate masses comprised of agglomerated smaller primary particles. For example, 0.5 μm particles could be agglomerates of nanometer-sized primary particles.

As noted, the liquid feed 102 includes one or more precursors for preparation of the particles 112. The precursor may be a substance in either a liquid or solid phase of the liquid feed 102. Frequently, the precursor will be a material, such as a salt, dissolved in a liquid solvent of the liquid feed 102. The precursor may undergo one or more chemical reactions in the furnace 110 to assist in production of the particles 112. Alternatively, the precursor material may contribute to formation of the particles 112 without undergoing a substantial chemical reaction. This could be the case, for example, when the liquid feed 102 includes, as a precursor material, suspended particles that are not substantially chemically modified in the furnace 110. In any event, the particles 112 comprise at least one component originally contributed by the precursor.

For the production of fine battery powders, the liquid feed 102 will include multiple

precursor materials, which may be present together in a single phase or separately in multiple phases. For example, the liquid feed 102 may include multiple precursors in solution in a single liquid vehicle. Also, one precursor material could be in one liquid phase and a second precursor material could be in a second liquid phase, such as could be the case when the liquid feed 102 comprises an emulsion. Examples of such precursor solutions and the reactions to form fine battery powders are detailed herein below:

The carrier gas 104 may comprise any gaseous medium in which droplets produced from the liquid feed 102 may be dispersed in aerosol form. The carrier gas 104 may be inert, in that the carrier gas 104 does not participate in formation of the particles 112.

Alternatively, the carrier gas may have one or more active component(s) that contribute to formation of the particles 112. In that regard, the carrier gas may include one or more reactive components that react in the furnace 110 to contribute to formation of the particles 112.

The aerosol generator 106 atomizes the liquid feed 102 to form droplets in a manner to permit the carrier gas 104 to sweep the droplets away to form the aerosol 108. The droplets comprise liquid from the liquid feed 102. The droplets may also include nonliquid material, such as one or more small particles held in the droplet by the liquid. For example, one phase of the particles may be provided in the liquid feed 102 in the form of suspended precursor particles and a second phase of the particles may be produced in the furnace 110 from one or more precursors in the liquid phase of the liquid feed 102. Furthermore, the precursor particles could be included in the liquid feed 102, and therefore also in droplets of the aerosol 108, for the purpose only of dispersing the particles for subsequent compositional or structural modification during or after processing in the furnace 110.

An important aspect of the present invention is generation of the aerosol 108 with droplets of a small average size and, preferably, a narrow size distribution. In this manner, the particles 112 may be produced at a desired small size with a narrow size distribution, which is advantageous for many applications.

The aerosol generator 106 is preferably capable of producing the aerosol 108 such that it includes droplets having a weight average size in a range having a lower limit of about 1 μm and preferably about 2 μm ; and an upper limit of about 20 μm ; preferably about

10 μm , more preferably about 7 μm and most preferably about 5 μm . A weight average droplet size in a range of from about 2 μm to about 4 μm is preferred for many applications. The aerosol generator is also capable of producing the aerosol 108 such that it includes droplets having a narrow size distribution. Preferably, the droplets in the aerosol are such
5 that at least about 70 percent (more preferably at least about 80 weight percent and most preferably at least about 85 weight percent) of the droplets are smaller than about 10 μm and more preferably at least about 70 weight percent (more preferably at least about 80 weight percent and most preferably at least about 85 weight percent) are smaller than about 5 μm . Furthermore, preferably no greater than about 30 weight percent, more
10 preferably no greater than about 25 weight percent and most preferably no greater than about 20 weight percent, of the droplets in the aerosol 108 are larger than about twice the weight average droplet size.

Another important aspect of the present invention is that the aerosol 108 may be generated without consuming excessive amounts of the carrier gas 104. The aerosol
15 generator 106 is capable of producing the aerosol 108 such that it has a high loading, or high concentration, of the liquid feed 102 in droplet form. In that regard, the aerosol 108 preferably includes greater than about 1×10^6 droplets per cubic centimeter of the aerosol 108, more preferably greater than about 5×10^6 droplets per cubic centimeter, still more preferably greater than about 1×10^7 droplets per cubic centimeter, and most preferably
20 greater than about 5×10^7 droplets per cubic centimeter. That the aerosol generator 106 can produce such a heavily loaded aerosol 108 is particularly surprising considering the high quality of the aerosol 108 with respect to small average droplet size and narrow droplet size distribution. Typically, droplet loading in the aerosol is such that the volumetric ratio of liquid feed 102 to carrier gas 104 in the aerosol 108 is larger than about 0.04
25 milliliters of liquid feed 102 per liter of carrier gas 104 in the aerosol 108, preferably larger than about 0.083 milliliters of liquid feed 102 per liter of carrier gas 104 in the aerosol 108, more preferably larger than about 0.167 milliliters of liquid feed 102 per liter of carrier gas 104, still more preferably larger than about 0.25 milliliters of liquid feed 102 per liter of carrier gas 104, and most preferably larger than about 0.333 milliliters of liquid feed 102
30 per liter of carrier gas 104.

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This capability of the aerosol generator 106 to produce a heavily loaded aerosol 108 is even more surprising given the high droplet output rate of which the aerosol generator 106 is capable, as discussed more fully below. It will be appreciated that the concentration of liquid feed 102 in the aerosol 108 will depend upon the specific components and attributes of the liquid feed 102 and, particularly, the size of the droplets in the aerosol 108. For example, when the average droplet size is from about 2 μm to about 4 μm , the droplet loading is preferably larger than about 0.15 milliliters of aerosol feed 102 per liter of carrier gas 104, more preferably larger than about 0.2 milliliters of liquid feed 102 per liter of carrier gas 104, even more preferably larger than about 0.25 milliliters of liquid feed 102 per liter of carrier gas 104, and most preferably larger than about 0.3 milliliters of liquid feed 102 per liter of carrier gas 104. When reference is made herein to liters of carrier gas 104, it refers to the volume that the carrier gas 104 would occupy under conditions of standard temperature and pressure.

The furnace 110 may be any suitable device for heating the aerosol 108 to evaporate liquid from the droplets of the aerosol 108 and thereby permit formation of the particles 112. The maximum average stream temperature, or reaction temperature, refers to the maximum average temperature that an aerosol stream attains while flowing through the furnace. This is typically determined by a temperature probe inserted into the furnace. Preferred reaction temperatures according to the present invention are discussed more fully below.

Although longer residence times are possible, for many applications, residence time in the heating zone of the furnace 110 of shorter than about 4 seconds is typical, such as from about 1 to 2 seconds. The residence time should be long enough, however, to assure that the particles 112 attain the desired maximum stream temperature for a given heat transfer rate. In that regard, with extremely short residence times, higher furnace temperatures could be used to increase the rate of heat transfer so long as the particles 112 attain a maximum temperature within the desired stream temperature range. That mode of operation, however, is not preferred. Also, it is preferred that, in most cases, the maximum stream temperature not be attained in the furnace 110 until substantially at the end of the heating zone in the furnace 110. For example, the heating zone will often

include a plurality of heating sections that are each independently controllable. The maximum stream temperature should typically not be attained until the final heating section, and more preferably until substantially at the end of the last heating section. This is important to reduce the potential for thermophoretic losses of material. Also, it is noted
5 that as used herein, residence time refers to the actual time for a material to pass through the relevant process equipment. In the case of the furnace, this includes the effect of increasing velocity with gas expansion due to heating.

Typically, the furnace 110 will be a tube-shaped furnace, so that the aerosol 108 moving into and through the furnace does not encounter sharp edges on which droplets
10 could collect. Loss of droplets to collection at sharp surfaces results in a lower yield of particles 112. Further, the accumulation of liquid at sharp edges can result in re-release of undesirably large droplets back into the aerosol 108, which can cause contamination of the particulate product 116 with undesirably large particles. Also, over time, such liquid collection at sharp surfaces can cause fouling of process equipment, impairing process
15 performance.

The furnace 110 may include a heating tube made of any suitable material. The tube material may be a ceramic material, for example, mullite, silica or alumina. Alternatively, the tube may be metallic. Advantages of using a metallic tube are low cost, ability to withstand steep temperature gradients and large thermal shocks, machinability
20 and weldability, and ease of providing a seal between the tube and other process equipment. Disadvantages of using a metallic tube include limited operating temperature and increased reactivity in some reaction systems.

When a metallic tube is used in the furnace 110, it is preferably a high nickel content stainless steel alloy, such as a 330 stainless steel, or a nickel-based super alloy. As noted,
25 one of the major advantages of using a metallic tube is that the tube is relatively easy to seal with other process equipment. In that regard, flange fittings may be welded directly to the tube for connecting with other process equipment. Metallic tubes are generally preferred for making particles that do not require a maximum tube wall temperature of higher than about 1100°C during particle manufacture.

30 When higher temperatures are required, ceramic tubes are typically used. One

major problem with ceramic tubes, however, is that the tubes can be difficult to seal with other process equipment, especially when the ends of the tubes are maintained at relatively high temperatures, as is often the case with the present invention.

Also, although the present invention is described with primary reference to a furnace reactor, which is preferred, it should be recognized that, except as noted, any other thermal reactor, including a flame reactor or a plasma reactor, could be used instead. A furnace reactor is, however, preferred, because of the generally even heating characteristic of a furnace for attaining a uniform stream temperature.

The particle collector 114, may be any suitable apparatus for collecting particles 112 to produce the particulate product 116. One preferred embodiment of the particle collector 114 uses one or more filter to separate the particles 112 from the gas. Such a filter may be of any type, including a bag filter. Another preferred embodiment of the particle collector uses one or more cyclone to separate the particles 112. Other apparatus that may be used in the particle collector 114 includes an electrostatic precipitator. Also, collection should normally occur at a temperature above the condensation temperature of the gas stream in which the particles 112 are suspended. Further, collection should normally be at a temperature that is low enough to prevent significant agglomeration of the particles 112.

Of significant importance to the operation of the process of the present invention is the aerosol generator 106, which must be capable of producing a high quality aerosol with high droplet loading, as previously noted. With reference to Fig. 2, one embodiment of an aerosol generator 106 of the present invention is described. The aerosol generator 106 includes a plurality of ultrasonic transducer discs 120 that are each mounted in a transducer housing 122. The transducer housings 122 are mounted to a transducer mounting plate 124, creating an array of the ultrasonic transducer discs 120. Any convenient spacing may be used for the ultrasonic transducer discs 120. Center-to-center spacing of the ultrasonic transducer discs 120 of about 4 centimeters is often adequate. The aerosol generator 106, as shown in Fig. 2, includes forty-nine transducers in a 7 x 7 array. The array configuration is as shown in Fig. 3, which depicts the locations of the transducer housings 122 mounted to the transducer mounting plate 124.

With continued reference to Fig. 2, a separator 126, in spaced relation to the transducer discs 120, is retained between a bottom retaining plate 128 and a top retaining plate 130. Gas delivery tubes 132 are connected to gas distribution manifolds 134, which have gas delivery ports 136. The gas distribution manifolds 134 are housed within a generator body 138 that is covered by generator lid 140. A transducer driver 144, having circuitry for driving the transducer discs 120, is electronically connected with the transducer discs 120 via electrical cables 146.

During operation of the aerosol generator 106, as shown in Fig. 2, the transducer discs 120 are activated by the transducer driver 144 via the electrical cables 146. The transducers preferably vibrate at a frequency of from about 1 MHz to about 5 MHz, more preferably from about 1.5 MHz to about 3 MHz. Commonly used frequencies are at about 1.6 MHz and about 2.4 MHz. Furthermore, all of the transducer discs 110 should be operating at substantially the same frequency when an aerosol with a narrow droplet size distribution is desired. This is important because commercially available transducers can vary significantly in thickness, sometimes by as much as 10%. It is preferred, however, that the transducer discs 120 operate at frequencies within a range of 5% above and below the median transducer frequency, more preferably within a range of 2.5%, and most preferably within a range of 1%. This can be accomplished by careful selection of the transducer discs 120 so that they all preferably have thicknesses within 5% of the median transducer thickness, more preferably within 2.5%, and most preferably within 1%.

Liquid feed 102 enters through a feed inlet 148 and flows through flow channels 150 to exit through feed outlet 152. An ultrasonically transmissive fluid, typically water, enters through a water inlet 154 to fill a water bath volume 156 and flow through flow channels 158 to exit through a water outlet 160. A proper flow rate of the ultrasonically transmissive fluid is necessary to cool the transducer discs 120 and to prevent overheating of the ultrasonically transmissive fluid. Ultrasonic signals from the transducer discs 120 are transmitted, via the ultrasonically transmissive fluid, across the water bath volume 156, and ultimately across the separator 126, to the liquid feed 102 in flow channels 150.

The ultrasonic signals from the ultrasonic transducer discs 120 cause atomization cones 162 to develop in the liquid feed 102 at locations corresponding with the transducer

discs 120. Carrier gas 104 is introduced into the gas delivery tubes 132 and delivered to the vicinity of the atomization cones 162 via gas delivery ports 136. Jets of carrier gas exit the gas delivery ports 136 in a direction so as to impinge on the atomization cones 162, thereby sweeping away atomized droplets of the liquid feed 102 that are being generated from the atomization cones 162 and creating the aerosol 108, which exits the aerosol generator 106 through an aerosol exit opening 164.

Efficient use of the carrier gas 104 is an important aspect of the aerosol generator 106. The embodiment of the aerosol generator 106 shown in Fig. 2 includes two gas exit ports per atomization cone 162, with the gas ports being positioned above the liquid medium 102 over troughs that develop between the atomization cones 162, such that the exiting carrier gas 104 is horizontally directed at the surface of the atomization cones 162, thereby efficiently distributing the carrier gas 104 to critical portions of the liquid feed 102 for effective and efficient sweeping away of droplets as they form about the ultrasonically energized atomization cones 162. Furthermore, it is preferred that at least a portion of the opening of each of the gas delivery ports 136, through which the carrier gas exits the gas delivery tubes, should be located below the top of the atomization cones 162 at which the carrier gas 104 is directed. This relative placement of the gas delivery ports 136 is very important to efficient use of carrier gas 104. Orientation of the gas delivery ports 136 is also important. Preferably, the gas delivery ports 136 are positioned to horizontally direct jets of the carrier gas 104 at the atomization cones 162. The aerosol generator 106 permits generation of the aerosol 108 with heavy loading with droplets of the carrier liquid 102, unlike aerosol generator designs that do not efficiently focus gas delivery to the locations of droplet formation.

Another important feature of the aerosol generator 106, as shown in Fig. 2, is the use of the separator 126, which protects the transducer discs 120 from direct contact with the liquid feed 102, which is often highly corrosive. The height of the separator 126 above the top of the transducer discs 120 should normally be kept as small as possible, and is often in the range of from about 1 centimeter to about 2 centimeters. The top of the liquid feed 102 in the flow channels above the tops of the ultrasonic transducer discs 120 is typically in a range of from about 2 centimeters to about 5 centimeters, whether or not the

aerosol generator includes the separator 126, with a distance of about 3 to 4 centimeters being preferred. Although the aerosol generator 106 could be made without the separator 126, in which case the liquid feed 102 would be in direct contact with the transducer discs 120, the highly corrosive nature of the liquid feed 102 can often cause premature failure
5 of the transducer discs 120. The use of the separator 126, in combination with use of the ultrasonically transmissive fluid in the water bath volume 156 to provide ultrasonic coupling, significantly extends the life of the ultrasonic transducers 120. One disadvantage of using the separator 126, however, is that the rate of droplet production from the atomization cones 162 is reduced, often by a factor of two or more, relative to designs in which the
10 liquid feed 102 is in direct contact with the ultrasonic transducer discs 102. Even with the separator 126, however, the aerosol generator 106 used with the present invention is capable of producing a high quality aerosol with heavy droplet loading, as previously discussed. Suitable materials for the separator 126 include, for example, polyamides (such as Kapton™ membranes from DuPont) and other polymer materials, glass, and
15 plexiglass. The main requirements for the separator 126 are that it be ultrasonically transmissive, corrosion resistant and impermeable.

One alternative to using the separator 126 is to bind a corrosion-resistant protective coating onto the surface of the ultrasonic transducer discs 120, thereby preventing the liquid feed 102 from contacting the surface of the ultrasonic transducer discs 120. When
20 the ultrasonic transducer discs 120 have a protective coating, the aerosol generator 106 will typically be constructed without the water bath volume 156 and the liquid feed 102 will flow directly over the ultrasonic transducer discs 120. Examples of such protective coating materials include platinum, gold, TEFLON™, epoxies and various plastics. Such coating typically significantly extends transducer life. Also, when operating without the separator
25 126, the aerosol generator 106 will typically produce the aerosol 108 with a much higher droplet loading than when the separator 126 is used.

One surprising finding with operation of the aerosol generator 106 of the present invention is that the droplet loading in the aerosol may be affected by the temperature of the liquid feed 102. It has been found that when the liquid feed 102 includes an aqueous
30 liquid at an elevated temperature, the droplet loading increases significantly. The

temperature of the liquid feed 102 is preferably higher than about 30°C, more preferably higher than about 35°C and most preferably higher than about 40°C. If the temperature becomes too high, however, it can have a detrimental effect on droplet loading in the aerosol 108. Therefore, the temperature of the liquid feed 102 from which the aerosol 108 is made should generally be lower than about 50°C, and preferably lower than about 45°C. The liquid feed 102 may be maintained at the desired temperature in any suitable fashion. For example, the portion of the aerosol generator 106 where the liquid feed 102 is converted to the aerosol 108 could be maintained at a constant elevated temperature. Alternatively, the liquid feed 102 could be delivered to the aerosol generator 106 from a constant temperature bath maintained separate from the aerosol generator 106. When the ultrasonic generator 106 includes the separator 126, the ultrasonically transmissive fluid adjacent the ultrasonic transducer discs 120 are preferably also at an elevated temperature in the ranges discussed for the liquid feed 102.

The design for the aerosol generator 106 based on an array of ultrasonic transducers is versatile and is easily modified to accommodate different generator sizes for different specialty applications. The aerosol generator 106 may be designed to include a plurality of ultrasonic transducers in any convenient number. Even for smaller scale production, however, the aerosol generator 106 preferably has at least nine ultrasonic transducers, more preferably at least 16 ultrasonic transducers, and even more preferably at least 25 ultrasonic transducers. For larger scale production, however, the aerosol generator 106 includes at least 40 ultrasonic transducers, more preferably at least 100 ultrasonic transducers, and even more preferably at least 400 ultrasonic transducers. In some large volume applications, the aerosol generator may have at least 1000 ultrasonic transducers.

Figs. 4-21 show component designs for an aerosol generator 106 including an array of 400 ultrasonic transducers. Referring first to Figs. 4 and 5, the transducer mounting plate 124 is shown with a design to accommodate an array of 400 ultrasonic transducers, arranged in four subarrays of 100 ultrasonic transducers each. The transducer mounting plate 124 has integral vertical walls 172 for containing the ultrasonically transmissive fluid, typically water, in a water bath similar to the water bath volume 156 described previously

with reference to Fig. 2.

As shown in Figs. 4 and 5, four hundred transducer mounting receptacles 174 are provided in the transducer mounting plate 124 for mounting ultrasonic transducers for the desired array. With reference to Fig. 6, the profile of an individual transducer mounting receptacle 174 is shown. A mounting seat 176 accepts an ultrasonic transducer for mounting, with a mounted ultrasonic transducer being held in place via screw holes 178. Opposite the mounting receptacle 176 is a flared opening 180 through which an ultrasonic signal may be transmitted for the purpose of generating the aerosol 108, as previously described with reference to Fig. 2.

A preferred transducer mounting configuration, however, is shown in Fig. 7 for another configuration for the transducer mounting plate 124. As illustrated in Fig. 7, an ultrasonic transducer disc 120 is mounted to the transducer mounting plate 124 by use of a compression screw 177 threaded into a threaded receptacle 179. The compression screw 177 bears against the ultrasonic transducer disc 120, causing an o-ring 181, situated in an o-ring seat 182 on the transducer mounting plate, to be compressed to form a seal between the transducer mounting plate 124 and the ultrasonic transducer disc 120. This type of transducer mounting is particularly preferred when the ultrasonic transducer disc 120 includes a protective surface coating, as discussed previously, because the seal of the o-ring to the ultrasonic transducer disc 120 will be inside of the outer edge of the protective seal, thereby preventing liquid from penetrating under the protective surface coating from the edges of the ultrasonic transducer disc 120.

Referring now to Fig. 8, the bottom retaining plate 128 for a 400 transducer array is shown having a design for mating with the transducer mounting plate 124 (shown in Figs. 4-5). The bottom retaining plate 128 has eighty openings 184, arranged in four subgroups of twenty openings 184 each. Each of the openings 184 corresponds with five of the transducer mounting receptacles 174 (shown in Figs. 4 and 5) when the bottom retaining plate 128 is mated with the transducer mounting plate 124 to create a volume for a water bath between the transducer mounting plate 124 and the bottom retaining plate 128. The openings 184, therefore, provide a pathway for ultrasonic signals generated by ultrasonic transducers to be transmitted through the bottom retaining plate.

Referring now to Figs. 9 and 10, a liquid feed box 190 for a 400 transducer array is shown having the top retaining plate 130 designed to fit over the bottom retaining plate 128 (shown in Fig. 8), with a separator 126 (not shown) being retained between the bottom retaining plate 128 and the top retaining plate 130 when the aerosol generator 106 is assembled. The liquid feed box 190 also includes vertically extending walls 192 for containing the liquid feed 102 when the aerosol generator is in operation. Also shown in Figs. 9 and 10 is the feed inlet 148 and the feed outlet 152. An adjustable weir 198 determines the level of liquid feed 102 in the liquid feed box 190 during operation of the aerosol generator 106.

The top retaining plate 130 of the liquid feed box 190 has eighty openings 194 therethrough, which are arranged in four subgroups 196 of twenty openings 194 each. The openings 194 of the top retaining plate 130 correspond in size with the openings 184 of the bottom retaining plate 128 (shown in Fig. 8). When the aerosol generator 106 is assembled, the openings 194 through the top retaining plate 130 and the openings 184 through the bottom retaining plate 128 are aligned, with the separator 126 positioned therebetween, to permit transmission of ultrasonic signals when the aerosol generator 106 is in operation.

Referring now to Figs. 9-11, a plurality of gas tube feed-through holes 202 extend through the vertically extending walls 192 to either side of the assembly including the feed inlet 148 and feed outlet 152 of the liquid feed box 190. The gas tube feed-through holes 202 are designed to permit insertion therethrough of gas tubes 208 of a design as shown in Fig. 11. When the aerosol generator 106 is assembled, a gas tube 208 is inserted through each of the gas tube feed-through holes 202 so that gas delivery ports 136 in the gas tube 208 will be properly positioned and aligned adjacent the openings 194 in the top retaining plate 130 for delivery of gas to atomization cones that develop in the liquid feed box 190 during operation of the aerosol generator 106. The gas delivery ports 136 are typically holes having a diameter of from about 1.5 millimeters to about 3.5 millimeters.

Referring now to Fig. 12, a partial view of the liquid feed box 190 is shown with gas tubes 208A, 208B and 208C positioned adjacent to the openings 194 through the top retaining plate 130. Also shown in Fig. 12 are the relative locations that ultrasonic

transducer discs 120 would occupy when the aerosol generator 106 is assembled. As seen in Fig. 15, the gas tube 208A, which is at the edge of the array, has five gas delivery ports 136. Each of the gas delivery ports 136 is positioned to divert carrier gas 104 to a different one of atomization cones that develop over the array of ultrasonic transducer discs 120 when the aerosol generator 106 is operating. The gas tube 208B, which is one row in from the edge of the array, is a shorter tube that has ten gas delivery ports 136, five each on opposing sides of the gas tube 208B. The gas tube 208B, therefore, has gas delivery ports 136 for delivering gas to atomization cones corresponding with each of ten ultrasonic transducer discs 120. The third gas tube, 208C, is a longer tube that also has ten gas delivery ports 136 for delivering gas to atomization cones corresponding with ten ultrasonic transducer discs 120. The design shown in Fig. 12, therefore, includes one gas delivery port per ultrasonic transducer disc 120. Although this is a lower density of gas delivery ports 136 than for the embodiment of the aerosol generator 106 shown in Fig. 2, which includes two gas delivery ports per ultrasonic transducer disc 120, the design shown in Fig. 12 is, nevertheless, capable of producing a dense, high-quality aerosol without unnecessary waste of gas.

Referring now to Fig. 13, the flow of carrier gas 104 relative to atomization cones 162 during operation of the aerosol generator 106 having a gas distribution configuration to deliver carrier gas 104 from gas delivery ports on both sides of the gas tubes 208, as was shown for the gas tubes 208A, 208B and 208C in the gas distribution configuration shown in Fig. 11. The carrier gas 104 sweeps both directions from each of the gas tubes 208.

An alternative, and preferred, flow for carrier gas 104 is shown in Fig. 14. As shown in Fig. 14, carrier gas 104 is delivered from only one side of each of the gas tubes 208. This results in a sweep of carrier gas from all of the gas tubes 208 toward a central area 212. This results in a more uniform flow pattern for aerosol generation that may significantly enhance the efficiency with which the carrier gas 104 is used to produce an aerosol. The aerosol that is generated, therefore, tends to be more heavily loaded with liquid droplets.

Another configuration for distributing carrier gas in the aerosol generator 106 is

shown in Figs. 15 and 16. In this configuration, the gas tubes 208 are hung from a gas distribution plate 216 adjacent gas flow holes 218 through the gas distribution plate 216. In the aerosol generator 106, the gas distribution plate 216 would be mounted above the liquid feed, with the gas flow holes positioned to each correspond with an underlying ultrasonic transducer. Referring specifically to Fig. 16, when the ultrasonic generator 106 is in operation, atomization cones 162 develop through the gas flow holes 218, and the gas tubes 208 are located such that carrier gas 104 exiting from ports in the gas tubes 208 impinge on the atomization cones and flow upward through the gas flow holes. The gas flow holes 218, therefore, act to assist in efficiently distributing the carrier gas 104 about the atomization cones 162 for aerosol formation. It should be appreciated that the gas distribution plates 218 can be made to accommodate any number of the gas tubes 208 and gas flow holes 218. For convenience of illustration, the embodiment shown in Figs. 15 and 16 shows a design having only two of the gas tubes 208 and only 16 of the gas flow holes 218. Also, it should be appreciated that the gas distribution plate 216 could be used alone, without the gas tubes 208. In that case, a slight positive pressure of carrier gas 104 would be maintained under the gas distribution plate 216 and the gas flow holes 218 would be sized to maintain the proper velocity of carrier gas 104 through the gas flow holes 218 for efficient aerosol generation. Because of the relative complexity of operating in that mode, however, it is not preferred.

Aerosol generation may also be enhanced through mounting of ultrasonic transducers at a slight angle and directing the carrier gas at resulting atomization cones such that the atomization cones are tilting in the same direction as the direction of flow of carrier gas. Referring to Fig. 17, an ultrasonic transducer disc 120 is shown. The ultrasonic transducer disc 120 is tilted at a tilt angle 114 (typically less than 10 degrees), so that the atomization cone 162 will also have a tilt. It is preferred that the direction of flow of the carrier gas 104 directed at the atomization cone 162 is in the same direction as the tilt of the atomization cone 162.

Referring now to Figs. 18 and 19, a gas manifold 220 is shown for distributing gas to the gas tubes 208 in a 400 transducer array design. The gas manifold 220 includes a gas distribution box 222 and piping stubs 224 for connection with gas tubes 208 (shown

in Fig. 11). Inside the gas distribution box 222 are two gas distribution plates 226 that form a flow path to assist in distributing the gas equally throughout the gas distribution box 222, to promote substantially equal delivery of gas through the piping stubs 224. The gas manifold 220, as shown in Figs. 18 and 19, is designed to feed eleven gas tubes 208. For
5 the 400 transducer design, a total of four gas manifolds 220 are required.

Referring now to Figs 20 and 21, the generator lid 140 is shown for a 400 transducer array design. The generator lid 140 mates with and covers the liquid feed box 190 (shown in Figs. 9 and 10). The generator lid 140, as shown in Figs. 20 and 21, has a hood design to permit easy collection of the aerosol 108 without subjecting droplets in the aerosol 108
10 to sharp edges on which droplets may coalesce and be lost, and possibly interfere with the proper operation of the aerosol generator 106. When the aerosol generator 106 is in operation, the aerosol 108 would be withdrawn via the aerosol exit opening 164 through the generator cover 140.

It is important that the aerosol stream fed to the furnace 110 have a high droplet
15 flow rate and high droplet loading as would be required for most industrial applications. With the present invention, the aerosol stream fed to the furnace preferably includes a droplet flow of greater than about 0.5 liters per hour, more preferably greater than about 2 liters per hour, still more preferably greater than about 5 liters per hour, even more preferably greater than about 10 liters per hour, particularly greater than about 50 liters per
20 hour and most preferably greater than about 100 liters per hour; and with the droplet loading being typically greater than about 0.04 milliliters of droplets per liter of carrier gas, preferably greater than about 0.083 milliliters of droplets per liter of carrier gas 104, more preferably greater than about 0.167 milliliters of droplets per liter of carrier gas 104, still more preferably greater than about 0.25 milliliters of droplets per liter of carrier gas 104,
25 particularly greater than about 0.33 milliliters of droplets per liter of carrier gas 104 and most preferably greater than about 0.83 milliliters of droplets per liter of carrier gas 104.

As discussed previously, the aerosol generator 106 of the present invention produces a concentrated, high quality aerosol of micro-sized droplets having a relatively narrow size distribution. It has been found, however, that for many applications the
30 process of the present invention is significantly enhanced by further classifying by size the

droplets in the aerosol 108 prior to introduction of the droplets into the furnace 110. In this manner, the size and size distribution of particles in the particulate product 116 are further controlled.

Referring now to Fig. 22, a process flow diagram is shown for one embodiment of the process of the present invention including such droplet classification. As shown in Fig. 22, the aerosol 108 from the aerosol generator 106 goes to a droplet classifier 280 where oversized droplets are removed from the aerosol 108 to prepare a classified aerosol 282. Liquid 284 from the oversized droplets that are being removed is drained from the droplet classifier 280. This drained liquid 284 may advantageously be recycled for use in preparing additional liquid feed 102.

Any suitable droplet classifier may be used for removing droplets above a predetermined size. For example, a cyclone could be used to remove over-size droplets. A preferred droplet classifier for many applications, however, is an impactor. One embodiment of an impactor for use with the present invention will now be described with reference to Figs. 23-27.

As seen in Fig. 23, an impactor 288 has disposed in a flow conduit 286 a flow control plate 290 and an impactor plate assembly 292. The flow control plate 290 is conveniently mounted on a mounting plate 294.

The flow control plate 290 is used to channel the flow of the aerosol stream toward the impactor plate assembly 292 in a manner with controlled flow characteristics that are desirable for proper impaction of oversize droplets on the impactor plate assembly 292 for removal through the drains 296 and 314. One embodiment of the flow control plate 290 is shown in Fig. 24. The flow control plate 290 has an array of circular flow ports 296 for channeling flow of the aerosol 108 towards the impactor plate assembly 292 with the desired flow characteristics.

Details of the mounting plate 294 are shown in Fig. 25. The mounting plate 294 has a mounting flange 298 with a large diameter flow opening 300 passing therethrough to permit access of the aerosol 108 to the flow ports 296 of the flow control plate 290 (shown in Fig. 24).

Referring now to Figs. 26 and 27, one embodiment of an impactor plate assembly

292 is shown. The impactor plate assembly 292 includes an impactor plate 302 and mounting brackets 304 and 306 used to mount the impactor plate 302 inside of the flow conduit 286. The impactor plate 302 and the flow channel plate 290 are designed so that droplets larger than a predetermined size will have momentum that is too large for those particles to change flow direction to navigate around the impactor plate 302.

During operation of the impactor 288, the aerosol 108 from the aerosol generator 106 passes through the upstream flow control plate 290. Most of the droplets in the aerosol navigate around the impactor plate 302 and exit the impactor 288 through the downstream flow control plate 290 in the classified aerosol 282. Droplets in the aerosol 108 that are too large to navigate around the impactor plate 302 will impact on the impactor plate 302 and drain through the drain 296 to be collected with the drained liquid 284 (as shown in Fig. 23).

The configuration of the impactor plate 302 shown in Fig. 22 represents only one of many possible configurations for the impactor plate 302. For example, the impactor 288 could include an upstream flow control plate 290 having vertically extending flow slits therethrough that are offset from vertically extending flow slits through the impactor plate 302, such that droplets too large to navigate the change in flow due to the offset of the flow slits between the flow control plate 290 and the impactor plate 302 would impact on the impactor plate 302 to be drained away. Other designs are also possible.

In a preferred embodiment of the present invention, the droplet classifier 280 is typically designed to remove droplets from the aerosol 108 that are larger than about 15 μm , more preferably to remove droplets larger than about 10 μm , even more preferably to remove droplets of a size larger than about 8 μm and most preferably to remove droplets larger than about 5 μm . The droplet classification size in the droplet classifier is preferably smaller than about 15 μm , more preferably smaller than about 10 μm , even more preferably smaller than about 8 μm and most preferably smaller than about 5 μm . The classification size, also called the classification cut point, is that size at which half of the droplets of that size are removed and half of the droplets of that size are retained. Depending upon the specific application, however, the droplet classification size may be varied, such as by changing the spacing between the impactor plate 302 and the flow

control plate 290 or increasing or decreasing aerosol velocity through the jets in the flow control plate 290. Because the aerosol generator 106 of the present invention initially produces a high quality aerosol 108, having a relatively narrow size distribution of droplets, typically less than about 30 weight percent of liquid feed 102 in the aerosol 108 is removed as the drain liquid 284 in the droplet classifier 288, with preferably less than about 25 weight percent being removed, even more preferably less than about 20 weight percent being removed and most preferably less than about 15 weight percent being removed. Minimizing the removal of liquid feed 102 from the aerosol 108 is particularly important for commercial applications to increase the yield of high quality particulate product 116. It should be noted, however, that because of the superior performance of the aerosol generator 106, it is typically not required to use an impactor or other droplet classifier to obtain a suitable aerosol. This is a major advantage, because the added complexity and liquid losses accompanying use of an impactor may often be avoided with the process of the present invention.

With some applications of the process of the present invention, it may be possible to collect the particles 112 directly from the output of the furnace 110. More often, however, it will be desirable to cool the particles 112 exiting the furnace 110 prior to collection of the particles 112 in the particle collector 114. Referring now to Fig. 28, one embodiment of the process of the present invention is shown in which the particles 112 exiting the furnace 110 are sent to a particle cooler 320 to produce a cooled particle stream 322, which is then fed to the particle collector 114. Although the particle cooler 320 may be any cooling apparatus capable of cooling the particles 112 to the desired temperature for introduction into the particle collector 114, traditional heat exchanger designs are not preferred. This is because a traditional heat exchanger design ordinarily directly subjects the aerosol stream, in which the hot particles 112 are suspended, to cool surfaces. In that situation, significant losses of the particles 112 occur due to thermophoretic deposition of the hot particles 112 on the cool surfaces of the heat exchanger. According to the present invention, a gas quench apparatus is provided for use as the particle cooler 320 that significantly reduces thermophoretic losses compared to a traditional heat exchanger.

Referring now to Figs. 29-31, one embodiment of a gas quench cooler 330 is

shown. The gas quench cooler includes a perforated conduit 332 housed inside of a cooler housing 334 with an annular space 336 located between the cooler housing 334 and the perforated conduit 332. In fluid communication with the annular space 336 is a quench gas inlet box 338, inside of which is disposed a portion of an aerosol outlet conduit 340.

5 The perforated conduit 332 extends between the aerosol outlet conduit 340 and an aerosol inlet conduit 342. Attached to an opening into the quench gas inlet box 338 are two quench gas feed tubes 344. Referring specifically to Fig. 31, the perforated tube 332 is shown. The perforated tube 332 has a plurality of openings 345. The openings 345, when the perforated conduit 332 is assembled into the gas quench cooler 330, permit the flow
10 of quench gas 346 from the annular space 336 into the interior space 348 of the perforated conduit 332. Although the openings 345 are shown as being round holes, any shape of opening could be used, such as slits. Also, the perforated conduit 332 could be a porous screen. Two heat radiation shields 347 prevent downstream radiant heating from the furnace. In most instances, however, it will not be necessary to include the heat radiation
15 shields 347, because downstream radiant heating from the furnace is normally not a significant problem. Use of the heat radiation shields 347 is not preferred due to particulate losses that accompany their use.

With continued reference to Figs. 29-31, operation of the gas quench cooler 330 will now be described. During operation, the particles 112, carried by and dispersed in a gas
20 stream, enter the gas quench cooler 330 through the aerosol inlet conduit 342 and flow into the interior space 348 of perforated conduit 332. Quench gas 346 is introduced through the quench gas feed tubes 344 into the quench gas inlet box 338. Quench gas 346 entering the quench gas inlet box 338 encounters the outer surface of the aerosol outlet conduit 340, forcing the quench gas 346 to flow, in a spiraling, swirling manner, into the
25 annular space 336, where the quench gas 346 flows through the openings 345 through the walls of the perforated conduit 332. Preferably, the gas 346 retains some swirling motion even after passing into the interior space 348. In this way, the particles 112 are quickly cooled with low losses of particles to the walls of the gas quench cooler 330. In this manner, the quench gas 346 enters in a radial direction into the interior space 348 of the
30 perforated conduit 332 around the entire periphery, or circumference, of the perforated

conduit 332 and over the entire length of the perforated conduit 332. The cool quench gas 346 mixes with and cools the hot particles 112, which then exit through the aerosol outlet conduit 340 as the cooled particle stream 322. The cooled particle stream 322 can then be sent to the particle collector 114 for particle collection. The temperature of the cooled particle stream 322 is controlled by introducing more or less quench gas. Also, as shown in Fig. 32, the quench gas 346 is fed into the quench cooler 330 in counter flow to the flow of the particles. Alternatively, the quench cooler could be designed so that the quench gas 346 is fed into the quench cooler in concurrent flow with the flow of the particles 112. The amount of quench gas 346 fed to the gas quench cooler 330 will depend upon the specific material being made and the specific operating conditions. The quantity of quench gas 346 used, however, must be sufficient to reduce the temperature of the aerosol stream including the particles 112 to the desired temperature. Typically, the particles 112 are cooled to a temperature at least below about 200°C, and often lower. The only limitation on how much the particles 112 are cooled is that the cooled particle stream 322 must be at a temperature that is above the condensation temperature for water as another condensible vapor in the stream. The temperature of the cooled particle stream 322 is often at a temperature of from about 50°C to about 120°C.

Because of the entry of quench gas 346 into the interior space 348 of the perforated conduit 322 in a radial direction about the entire circumference and length of the perforated conduit 322, a buffer of the cool quench gas 346 is formed about the inner wall of the perforated conduit 332, thereby significantly inhibiting the loss of hot particles 112 due to thermophoretic deposition on the cool wall of the perforated conduit 332. In operation, the quench gas 346 exiting the openings 345 and entering into the interior space 348 should have a radial velocity (velocity inward toward the center of the circular cross-section of the perforated conduit 332) of larger than the thermophoretic velocity of the particles 112 inside the perforated conduit 332 in a direction radially outward toward the perforated wall of the perforated conduit 332.

As seen in Figs. 29-31, the gas quench cooler 330 includes a flow path for the particles 112 through the gas quench cooler of a substantially constant cross-sectional shape and area. Preferably, the flow path through the gas quench cooler 330 will have the

same cross-sectional shape and area as the flow path through the furnace 110 and through the conduit delivering the aerosol 108 from the aerosol generator 106 to the furnace 110. In one embodiment, however, it may be necessary to reduce the cross-sectional area available for flow prior to the particle collector 114. This is the case, for example, when the particle collector includes a cyclone for separating particles in the cooled particle stream 322 from gas in the cooled particle stream 322. This is because of the high inlet velocity requirements into cyclone separators.

Referring now to Fig. 32, one embodiment of the gas quench cooler 330 is shown in combination with a cyclone separator 392. The perforated conduit 332 has a continuously decreasing cross-sectional area for flow to increase the velocity of flow to the proper value for the feed to cyclone separator 392. Attached to the cyclone separator 392 is a bag filter 394 for final clean-up of overflow from the cyclone separator 392. Separated particles exit with underflow from the cyclone separator 392 and may be collected in any convenient container. The use of cyclone separation is particularly preferred for powder having a weight average size of larger than about 1 μm , although a series of cyclones may sometimes be needed to obtain the desired degree of separation. Cyclone separation is particularly preferred for powders having a weight average size of larger than about 1.5 μm .

In an additional embodiment, the process of the present invention can also incorporate compositional modification of the particles 112 exiting the furnace. Most commonly, the compositional modification will involve forming on the particles 112 a material phase that is different than that of the particles 112, such as by coating the particles 112 with a coating material. One embodiment of the process of the present invention incorporating particle coating is shown in Fig. 33. As shown in Fig. 33, the particles 112 exiting from the furnace 110 go to a particle coater 350 where a coating is placed over the outer surface of the particles 112 to form coated particles 352, which are then sent to the particle collector 114 for preparation of the particulate product 116.

With continued reference primarily to Fig. 33, in a preferred embodiment, when the particles 112 are coated according to the process of the present invention, the particles 112 are also manufactured via the aerosol process of the present invention, as previously

described. The process of the present invention can, however, be used to coat particles that have been premanufactured by a different process. When coating particles that have been premanufactured by a different route, such as by liquid precipitation, it is preferred that the particles remain in a dispersed state from the time of manufacture to the time that the particles are introduced in slurry form into the aerosol generator 106 for preparation of the aerosol 108 to form the dry particles 112 in the furnace 110, which particles 112 can then be coated in the particle coater 350. Maintaining particles in a dispersed state from manufacture through coating avoids problems associated with agglomeration and redispersion of particles if particles must be redispersed in the liquid feed 102 for feed to the aerosol generator 106. For example, for particles originally precipitated from a liquid medium, the liquid medium containing the suspended precipitated particles could be used to form the liquid feed 102 to the aerosol generator 106. It should be noted that the particle coater 350 could be an integral extension of the furnace 110 or could be a separate piece of equipment.

In a further embodiment of the present invention, following preparation of the particles 112 in the furnace 110, the particles 112 may then be structurally modified to impart desired physical properties prior to particle collection. Referring now to Fig. 34, one embodiment of the process of the present invention is shown including such structural particle modification. The particles 112 exiting the furnace 110 go to a particle modifier 360 where the particles are structurally modified to form modified particles 362, which are then sent to the particle collector 114 for preparation of the particulate product 116. The particle modifier 360 is typically a furnace, such as an annealing furnace, which may be integral with the furnace 110 or may be a separate heating device. Regardless, it is important that the particle modifier 360 have temperature control that is independent of the furnace 110, so that the proper conditions for particle modification may be provided separate from conditions required of the furnace 110 to prepare the particles 112. The particle modifier 360, therefore, typically provides a temperature controlled environment and necessary residence time to effect the desired structural modification of the particles 112.

The structural modification that occurs in the particle modifier 360 may be any

modification to the crystalline structure or morphology of the particles 112. For example, the particles 112 may be annealed in the particle modifier 360 to densify the particles 112 or to recrystallize the particles 112. Also, the particles may be annealed for a sufficient time to permit redistribution within the particles 112 of the different material phases.

5 The initial morphology of composite particles made in the furnace 110, according to the present invention, could take a variety of forms, depending upon the specified materials involved and the specific processing conditions. Examples of some possible composite particle morphologies, manufacturable according to the present invention are shown in Fig. 35. These morphologies could be of the particles as initially produced in the
10 furnace 110 or that result from structural modification in the particle modifier 360. Furthermore, the composite particles could include a mixture of the morphological attributes shown in Fig. 35.

15 Aerosol generation with the process of the present invention has thus far been described with respect to the ultrasonic aerosol generator. Use of the ultrasonic generator is preferred for the process of the present invention because of the extremely high quality and dense aerosol generated. In some instances, however, the aerosol generation for the process of the present invention may have a different design depending upon the specific application of the battery powders. For example, when larger particles are desired, such as those having an average size of larger than about 3 μm , a spray nozzle atomizer may
20 be preferred. A spray nozzle atomizer also typically has a higher production rate than ultrasonic atomizers, leading to better production efficiency of the powders. For smaller-particle applications, however, and particularly for those applications to produce particles smaller than about 3 μm the ultrasonic generator, as described herein, is particularly preferred. In that regard, the ultrasonic generator of the present invention is particularly
25 preferred for when making particles with a weight average size of from about 0.1 μm to about 3 μm .

Although ultrasonic aerosol generators have been used for medical applications and home humidifiers, use of ultrasonic generators for spray pyrolysis particle manufacture has largely been confined to small-scale, experimental situations. The ultrasonic aerosol
30 generator of the present invention described with reference to Figures 2-21, however, is

well suited for commercial production of high quality powders with a small average size and a narrow size distribution. In that regard, the aerosol generator produces a high quality aerosol, with heavy droplet loading and at a high rate of production. Such a combination of small droplet size, narrow size distribution, heavy droplet loading, and high production rate provide significant advantages over existing aerosol generators that usually suffer from at least one of inadequately narrow size distribution, undesirably low droplet loading, or unacceptably low production rate.

Through the careful and controlled design of the ultrasonic generator of the present invention, an aerosol may be produced typically having greater than about 70 weight percent (and preferably greater than about 80 weight percent) of droplets in the size range of from about 1 μm to about 10 μm , preferably in a size range of from about 1 μm to about 5 μm and more preferably from about 2 μm to about 4 μm . Also, the ultrasonic generator of the present invention is capable of delivering high output rates of liquid feed in the aerosol. The rate of liquid feed, at the high liquid loadings previously described, is preferably greater than about 25 milliliters per hour per transducer, more preferably greater than about 37.5 milliliters per hour per transducer, even more preferably greater than about 50 milliliters per hour per transducer and most preferably greater than about 100 milliliters per hour per transducer. This high level of performance is desirable for commercial operations and is accomplished with the present invention with a relatively simple design including a single precursor bath over an array of ultrasonic transducers. The ultrasonic generator is made for high aerosol production rates at a high droplet loading, and with a narrow size distribution of droplets. The generator preferably produces an aerosol at a rate of greater than about 0.5 liter per hour of droplets, more preferably greater than about 2 liters per hour of droplets, still more preferably greater than about 5 liters per hour of droplets, even more preferably greater than about 10 liters per hour of droplets and most preferably greater than about 40 liters per hour of droplets. For example, when the aerosol generator has a 400 transducer design, as described with reference to Figures 4-21, the aerosol generator is capable of producing a high quality aerosol having high droplet loading as previously described, at a total production rate of preferably greater than about 10 liters per hour of liquid feed, more preferably greater than

about 15 liters per hour of liquid feed, even more preferably greater than about 20 liters per hour of liquid feed and most preferably greater than about 40 liters per hour of liquid feed.

Under most operating conditions, when using such an aerosol generator, total particulate product produced is preferably greater than about 0.5 gram per hour per transducer, more preferably greater than about 0.75 gram per hour per transducer, even more preferably greater than about 1.0 gram per hour per transducer and most preferably greater than about 2.0 grams per hour per transducer.

One significant aspect of the process of the present invention for manufacturing particulate materials is the unique flow characteristics encountered in the furnace relative to laboratory scale systems. The maximum Reynolds number attained for flow in the furnace 110 with the present invention is very high, typically in excess of 500, preferably in excess of 1,000 and more preferably in excess of 2,000. In most instances, however, the maximum Reynolds number for flow in the furnace will not exceed 10,000, and preferably will not exceed 5,000. This is significantly different from lab-scale systems where the Reynolds number for flow in a reactor is typically lower than 50 and rarely exceeds 100.

The Reynolds number is a dimensionless quantity characterizing flow of a fluid which, for flow through a circular cross sectional conduit is defined as:

$$Re = \frac{\rho v d}{\mu}$$

where: ρ = fluid density;
 v = fluid mean velocity;
 d = conduit inside diameter; and
 μ = fluid viscosity.

It should be noted that the values for density, velocity and viscosity will vary along the length of the furnace 110. The maximum Reynolds number in the furnace 110 is typically attained when the average stream temperature is at a maximum, because the gas velocity is at a very high value due to gas expansion when heated.

One problem with operating under flow conditions at a high Reynolds number is that undesirable volatilization of components is much more likely to occur than in systems

having flow characteristics as found in laboratory-scale systems. The volatilization problem occurs with the present invention, because the furnace is typically operated over a substantial section of the heating zone in a constant wall heat flux mode, due to limitations in heat transfer capability. This is significantly different than operation of a furnace at a laboratory scale, which typically involves operation of most of the heating zone of the furnace in a uniform wall temperature mode, because the heating load is sufficiently small that the system is not heat transfer limited.

With the present invention, it is typically preferred to heat the aerosol stream in the heating zone of the furnace as quickly as possible to the desired temperature range for particle manufacture. Because of flow characteristics in the furnace and heat transfer limitations, during rapid heating of the aerosol the wall temperature of the furnace can significantly exceed the maximum average target temperature for the stream. This is a problem because, even though the average stream temperature may be within the range desired, the wall temperature may become so hot that components in the vicinity of the wall are subjected to temperatures high enough to undesirably volatilize the components. This volatilization near the wall of the furnace can cause formation of significant quantities of ultrafine particles that are outside of the size range desired.

Therefore, with the present invention, it is preferred that when the flow characteristics in the furnace are such that the Reynolds number through any part of the furnace exceeds 500, more preferably exceeds 1,000, and most preferably exceeds 2,000, the maximum wall temperature in the furnace should be kept at a temperature that is below the temperature at which a desired component of the final particles would exert a vapor pressure not exceeding about 200 millitorr, more preferably not exceeding about 100 millitorr, and most preferably not exceeding about 50 millitorr. Furthermore, the maximum wall temperature in the furnace should also be kept below a temperature at which an intermediate component, from which a final component is to be at least partially derived, should also have a vapor pressure not exceeding the magnitudes noted for components of the final product.

In addition to maintaining the furnace wall temperature below a level that could create volatilization problems, it is also important that this not be accomplished at the

expense of the desired average stream temperature. The maximum average stream temperature must be maintained at a high enough level so that the particles will have a desired high density. The maximum average stream temperature should, however, generally be a temperature at which a component in the final particles, or an intermediate
5 component from which a component in the final particles is at least partially derived, would exert a vapor pressure not exceeding about 100 millitorr, preferably not exceeding about 50 millitorr, and most preferably not exceeding about 25 millitorr.

So long as the maximum wall temperature and the average stream temperature are kept below the point at which detrimental volatilization occurs, it is generally desirable to
10 heat the stream as fast as possible and to remove resulting particles from the furnace immediately after the maximum stream temperature is reached in the furnace. With the present invention, the average residence time in the heating zone of the furnace may typically be maintained at shorter than about 4 seconds, preferably shorter than about 2 seconds, more preferably shorter than about 1 second, still more preferably shorter than
15 about 0.5 second, and most preferably shorter than about 0.2 second.

Another significant issue with respect to operating the process of the present invention, which includes high aerosol flow rates, is loss within the system of materials intended for incorporation into the final particulate product. Material losses in the system can be quite high if the system is not properly operated. If system losses are too high, the
20 process would not be practical for use in the manufacture of particulate products of many materials. This has typically not been a major consideration with laboratory-scale systems.

One significant potential for loss with the process of the present invention is thermophoretic losses that occur when a hot aerosol stream is in the presence of a cooler surface. In that regard, the use of the quench cooler, as previously described, with the
25 process of the present invention provides an efficient way to cool the particles without unreasonably high thermophoretic losses. There is also, however, significant potential for losses occurring near the end of the furnace and between the furnace and the cooling unit.

It has been found that thermophoretic losses in the back end of the furnace can be significantly controlled if the heating zone of the furnace is operated such that the
30 maximum stream temperature is not attained until near the end of the heating zone in the

furnace, and at least not until the last third of the heating zone. When the heating zone includes a plurality of heating sections, the maximum average stream temperature should ordinarily not occur until at least the last heating section. Furthermore, the heating zone should typically extend to as close to the exit of the furnace as possible. This is counter
5 to conventional thought which is to typically maintain the exit portion of the furnace at a low temperature to avoid having to seal the furnace outlet at a high temperature. Such cooling of the exit portion of the furnace, however, significantly promotes thermophoretic losses. Furthermore, the potential for operating problems that could result in thermophoretic losses at the back end of the furnace are reduced with the very short residence times in the
10 furnace for the present invention, as discussed previously.

Typically, it would be desirable to instantaneously cool the aerosol upon exiting the furnace. This is not possible. It is possible, however, to make the residence time between the furnace outlet and the cooling unit as short as possible. Furthermore, it is desirable to insulate the aerosol conduit occurring between the furnace exit and the cooling unit
15 entrance. Even more preferred is to insulate that conduit and, even more preferably, to also heat that conduit so that the wall temperature of that conduit is at least as high as the average stream temperature of the aerosol stream. Furthermore, it is desirable that the cooling unit operate in a manner such that the aerosol is quickly cooled in a manner to prevent thermophoretic losses during cooling. The quench cooler, described previously,
20 is very effective for cooling with low losses. Furthermore, to keep the potential for thermophoretic losses very low, it is preferred that the residence time of the aerosol stream between attaining the maximum stream temperature in the furnace and a point at which the aerosol has been cooled to an average stream temperature below about 200°C is shorter than about 2 seconds, more preferably shorter than about 1 second, and even
25 more preferably shorter than about 0.5 second and most preferably shorter than about 0.1 second. Furthermore, the total residence time from the beginning of the heating zone in the furnace to a point at which the average stream temperature is at a temperature below about 200°C should typically be shorter than about 5 seconds, preferably shorter than about 3 seconds, more preferably shorter than about 2 seconds, and most preferably
30 shorter than about 1 second.

Another part of the process with significant potential for thermophoretic losses is after particle cooling until the particles are finally collected. Proper particle collection is very important to reducing losses within the system. The potential for thermophoretic losses is significant following particle cooling because the aerosol stream is still at an elevated temperature to prevent detrimental condensation of water in the aerosol stream. Therefore, cooler surfaces of particle collection equipment can result in significant thermophoretic losses.

To reduce the potential for thermophoretic losses before the particles are finally collected, it is important that the transition between the cooling unit and particle collection be as short as possible. Preferably, the output from the quench cooler is immediately sent to a particle separator, such as a filter unit or a cyclone. In that regard, the total residence time of the aerosol between attaining the maximum average stream temperature in the furnace and the final collection of the particles is preferably shorter than about 2 seconds, more preferably shorter than about 1 second, still more preferably shorter than about 0.5 second and most preferably shorter than about 0.1 second. Furthermore, the residence time between the beginning of the heating zone in the furnace and final collection of the particles is preferably shorter than about 6 seconds, more preferably shorter than about 3 seconds, even more preferably shorter than about 2 seconds, and most preferably shorter than about 1 second. Furthermore, the potential for thermophoretic losses may further be reduced by insulating the conduit section between the cooling unit and the particle collector and, even more preferably, by also insulating around the filter, when a filter is used for particle collection. The potential for losses may be reduced even further by heating of the conduit section between the cooling unit and the particle collection equipment, so that the internal equipment surfaces are at least slightly warmer than the aerosol stream average stream temperature. Furthermore, when a filter is used for particle collection, the filter could be heated. For example, insulation could be wrapped around a filter unit, with electric heating inside of the insulating layer to maintain the walls of the filter unit at a desired elevated temperature higher than the temperature of filter elements in the filter unit, thereby reducing thermophoretic particle losses to walls of the filter unit.

Even with careful operation to reduce thermophoretic losses, some losses will still

occur. For example, some particles will inevitably be lost to walls of particle collection equipment, such as the walls of a cyclone or filter housing. One way to reduce these losses, and correspondingly increase product yield, is to periodically wash the interior of the particle collection equipment to remove particles adhering to the sides. In most cases, the wash fluid will be water, unless water would have a detrimental effect on one of the components of the particles. For example, the particle collection equipment could include parallel collection paths. One path could be used for active particle collection while the other is being washed. The wash could include an automatic or manual flush without disconnecting the equipment. Alternatively, the equipment to be washed could be disconnected to permit access to the interior of the equipment for a thorough wash. As an alternative to having parallel collection paths, the process could simply be shut down occasionally to permit disconnection of the equipment for washing. The removed equipment could be replaced with a clean piece of equipment and the process could then be resumed while the disconnected equipment is being washed.

For example, a cyclone or filter unit could periodically be disconnected and particles adhering to interior walls could be removed by a water wash. The particles could then be dried in a low temperature dryer, typically at a temperature of lower than about 50°C.

Another area for potential losses in the system, and for the occurrence of potential operating problems, is between the outlet of the aerosol generator and the inlet of the furnace. Losses here are not due to thermophoresis, but rather to liquid coming out of the aerosol and impinging and collecting on conduit and equipment surfaces. Although this loss is undesirable from a material yield standpoint, the loss may be even more detrimental to other aspects of the process. For example, water collecting on surfaces may release large droplets that can lead to large particles that detrimentally contaminate the particulate product. Furthermore, if accumulated liquid reaches the furnace, the liquid can cause excessive temperature gradients within the furnace tube, which can cause furnace tube failure, especially for ceramic tubes. One way to reduce the potential for undesirable liquid buildup in the system is to provide adequate drains, as previously described. In that regard, it is preferred that a drain be placed as close as possible to the furnace inlet to prevent liquid accumulations from reaching the furnace. The drain should be placed,

however, far enough in advance of the furnace inlet such that the stream temperature is lower than about 80°C at the drain location.

Another way to reduce the potential for undesirable liquid buildup is for the conduit between the aerosol generator outlet and the furnace inlet to be of a substantially constant cross sectional area and configuration. Preferably, the conduit beginning with the aerosol generator outlet, passing through the furnace and continuing to at least the cooling unit inlet is of a substantially constant cross sectional area and geometry.

Another way to reduce the potential for undesirable buildup is to heat at least a portion, and preferably the entire length, of the conduit between the aerosol generator and the inlet to the furnace. For example, the conduit could be wrapped with a heating tape to maintain the inside walls of the conduit at a temperature higher than the temperature of the aerosol. The aerosol would then tend to concentrate toward the center of the conduit due to thermophoresis. Fewer aerosol droplets would, therefore, be likely to impinge on conduit walls or other surfaces making the transition to the furnace.

Another way to reduce the potential for undesirable liquid buildup is to introduce a dry gas into the aerosol between the aerosol generator and the furnace. Referring now to Fig. 36, one embodiment of the process is shown for adding a dry gas 118 to the aerosol 108 before the furnace 110. Addition of the dry gas 118 causes vaporization of at least a part of the moisture in the aerosol 108, and preferably substantially all of the moisture in the aerosol 108, to form a dried aerosol 119, which is then introduced into the furnace 110.

The dry gas 118 will most often be dry air, although in some instances it may be desirable to use dry nitrogen gas or some other dry gas. If sufficient a sufficient quantity of the dry gas 118 is used, the droplets of the aerosol 108 are substantially completely dried to beneficially form dried precursor particles in aerosol form for introduction into the furnace 110, where the precursor particles are then pyrolyzed to make a desired particulate product. Also, the use of the dry gas 118 typically will reduce the potential for contact between droplets of the aerosol and the conduit wall, especially in the critical area in the vicinity of the inlet to the furnace 110. In that regard, a preferred method for introducing the dry gas 118 into the aerosol 108 is from a radial direction into the aerosol 108. For example, equipment of substantially the same design as the quench cooler, described

previously with reference to Figs. 29-31, could be used, with the aerosol 108 flowing through the interior flow path of the apparatus and the dry gas 118 being introduced through perforated wall of the perforated conduit. An alternative to using the dry gas 118 to dry the aerosol 108 would be to use a low temperature thermal preheater/dryer prior to the furnace 110 to dry the aerosol 108 prior to introduction into the furnace 110. This alternative is not, however, preferred.

Still another way to reduce the potential for losses due to liquid accumulation is to operate the process with equipment configurations such that the aerosol stream flows in a vertical direction from the aerosol generator to and through the furnace. For smaller-size particles, those smaller than about 1.5 μm , this vertical flow should, preferably, be vertically upward. For larger-size particles, such as those larger than about 1.5 μm , the vertical flow is preferably vertically downward.

Furthermore, with the process of the present invention, the potential for system losses is significantly reduced because the total system retention time from the outlet of the generator until collection of the particles is typically shorter than about 10 seconds, preferably shorter than about 7 seconds, more preferably shorter than about 5 seconds and most preferably shorter than about 3 seconds.

For the production of fine battery particles according to the present invention, the liquid feed 102 includes at least one battery compound precursor. The precursor may be a substance in either a liquid or solid phase of the liquid feed 102. Preferably, the precursor will be a metal-containing compound, such as a salt, dissolved in a liquid solvent of the liquid feed 102. The precursor may undergo one or more chemical reactions in the furnace 110 to assist in production of the particles 112.

For example, the liquid feed 102 can comprise a solution containing nitrates, chlorides, sulfates, hydroxides, or carboxylates of a metal. A preferred component of the battery compound according to the present invention is lithium and a preferred precursor to lithium according to the present invention is lithium nitrate.

The solution preferably has a precursor concentration that is unsaturated to avoid the possibility of precipitate formation in the precursor solution. The solution preferably includes a soluble precursor to yield a concentration of from about 1 to about 50 weight

percent of the battery compound, more preferably from about 1 to 20 weight percent of the battery compound and even more preferably from about 3 to about 15 weight percent of the battery compound, such as about 5 weight percent of the battery compound. The final particle size of the particles 112 is also influenced by the precursor concentration.

- 5 Generally, lower precursor concentrations will produce particles having a smaller average particle size.

Preferably, the solvent is aqueous-based for ease of operation, although other solvents, such as toluene, may be desirable. As is disclosed above, the pH of the aqueous-based solutions can be adjusted to alter the solubility characteristics of the precursor in the solution.

Thus, the liquid feed 102 includes multiple precursor materials, which may be present together in a single phase or separately in multiple phases. For example, the liquid feed 102 may include multiple precursors in solution in a single liquid vehicle. Alternatively, one precursor material could be in a solid particulate phase and a second precursor material could be in a liquid phase. Also, one precursor material could be in one liquid phase and a second precursor material could be in a second liquid phase, such as could be the case for when the liquid feed 102 comprises an emulsion.

A carrier gas 104 under controlled pressure is introduced to the aerosol generator to move the droplets away from the generator. The carrier gas 104 may comprise any gaseous medium in which droplets produced from the liquid feed 102 may be dispersed in aerosol form. The carrier gas 104 can be inert, in that the carrier gas 104 does not directly participate in the formation of the particles 112. Alternatively, the carrier gas 104 may have one or more active component(s) that contribute to formation of the particles 112. For the production of fine battery particles 112, according to the present invention, the preferred carrier gas is air, which advantageously provides oxygen during formation of the particles.

Many battery materials can be difficult to produce using conventional methods such that the powders have the desirable physical and electrochemical characteristics. Many such compounds can be difficult to produce even using a standard spray pyrolysis

technique.

These compounds can advantageously be produced according to the present invention using a process referred to as spray-conversion. Spray-conversion is a process wherein a spray pyrolysis technique, as is described above, is used to produce an intermediate particulate product that is capable of being subsequently converted to a particulate battery compound having the desirable properties. The intermediate product advantageously has many of the desirable morphological properties discussed hereinbelow, such as a small particle size and a narrow particle size distribution.

As is discussed above, precursor materials including water-soluble precursors, such as nitrate salts, are placed into solution, atomized and are converted at a relatively low temperature, such as less than about 1000°C, to intermediate particles comprised of low crystallinity oxide phase(s). The intermediate particles have a small size and, preferably, a narrow particle size distribution, as is described in more detail below. The intermediate particles are then converted by further treatment, such as by heat treating at an elevated temperature, to form an active battery compound having high crystallinity and good electrochemical characteristics. The resulting powder advantageously does not require any further milling to reduce particle size or reduce agglomerates since the intermediate particles have the desired size and agglomeration is avoided during the subsequent heat treatment. The resulting end product is a highly crystalline powder having the desirable properties. The average particle size and morphological characteristics are determined by the characteristics of the intermediate product.

Thus, the precursors can be spray-converted at a temperature of, for example, less than about 1000 °C to form a homogeneous admixture of one or more oxides having low crystallinity. The intermediate particles can then be heat treated at a temperature of, for example, 800°C to 1700°C, to form the substantially phase pure battery compounds.

Depending on the reaction temperature, the residence time in the heating zone can

vary. It is preferred however that the residence time be typically no more than about 10 seconds, such as from about 1 to 2 seconds.

To form substantially uniform coatings on the surface of the active battery particles such as those discussed above, a reactive gas composition can be contacted with the particles at an elevated temperature after the particles have been formed. For example, the reactive gas can be introduced into the heated reaction zone at the distal end so that the desired compound deposits on the surface of the particle.

More specifically, the droplets can enter the heated reaction zone at a first end such that the droplets move through the heating zone and form the particles. At the opposite end of the heating zone, a reactive gas composition can be introduced such that the reactive gas composition contacts the particles at an elevated temperature. Alternatively, the reactive gas composition can be contacted with the heated particles in a separate heating zone located downstream from the heated reaction zone.

Coatings can be generated on the particle surface by a number of different mechanisms. One or more precursors can vaporize and fuse to the hot particle surface and thermally react resulting in the formation of a thin-film coating by chemical vapor deposition (CVD). Preferred coatings deposited by CVD include metal oxides and elemental metals. Further, the coating can be formed by physical vapor deposition (PVD) wherein a coating material physically deposits on the surface of the particles. Preferred coatings deposited by PVD include organic materials and elemental metals. Alternatively, the gaseous precursor can react in the gas phase forming small particles, for example less than about 5 nanometers in size, which then diffuse to the larger particle surface and sinter onto the surface, thus forming a coating. This method is referred to as gas-to-particle conversion (GPC). Whether such coating reactions occur by CVD, PVD or GPC is dependent on the reactor conditions, such as temperature, precursor partial pressure, water partial pressure and the concentration of particles in the gas stream. Another possible surface coating method is surface conversion of the surface of the particles by reaction with a vapor phase reactant to convert the surface of the particles to a different material than that originally contained in the particles.

In addition, a volatile coating material such as PbO , MoO_3 or V_2O_5 can be introduced

into the reactor such that the coating deposits on the particles by condensation. Further, the particles can be coated using other techniques. For example, soluble precursors to both the battery powder and the coating can be used in the precursor solution wherein the coating precursor is involatile, (e.g. $\text{Al}(\text{NO}_3)_3$) or volatile (e.g. $\text{Sn}(\text{OAc})_4$ where OAc is acetate). In another embodiment, a colloidal precursor and a soluble metal precursor can be used to form a particulate colloidal coating on the particle. It will be appreciated that multiple coatings can be deposited on the surface of the particles if such multiple coatings are desirable.

The coatings are preferably as thin as possible while maintaining conformity about particle such that the battery material is not substantially exposed. For example, coatings can have an average thickness of no greater than about 200 nanometers, preferably no greater than about 100 nanometers, and more preferably no greater than about 50 nanometers. For most applications, the coating should have an average thickness of at least about 5 nanometers.

The structural modification that occurs in the particle modifier 360 may be any modification to the crystalline structure or morphology of the particles 112. For example, the particles 112 may be annealed in the particle modifier 360 to densify the particles 112 or to recrystallize the particles 112. Also, the particles may be annealed for a sufficient time to redistribute the different material phases within the particles 112.

The present invention is directed to fine battery powder batches wherein the particles constituting the powder batch preferably have a spherical morphology, a small average particle size and a narrow particle size distribution. The powders according to the present invention are useful for a number of battery applications including use in both primary and secondary batteries. Among the batteries to which the powders are applicable are primary batteries based on Zn/MnO_2 and secondary batteries based on nickel-cadmium (Ni/Cd), nickel metal hydrides (Ni/MH_y), lithium/manganese dioxide (Li/MnO_2) and lithium ion battery materials including lithium manganese oxide (LiMn_2O_4 spinel), lithium cobalt oxide (LiCoO_2) and lithium nickel oxide (LiNiO_2).

The fine battery powder batches according to the present invention are particularly applicable to the production of the foregoing lithium ion compounds. While LiCoO_2 , LiNiO_2

and LiMn_2O_4 are preferred, other metals can be substituted for Co, Ni and Mn and the amount of Li can be varied to tailor the properties for specific applications. Exemplary compounds of this type include $\text{Li}_y\text{Co}_{1-x}\text{Ni}_x\text{O}_2$, $\text{Li}_y\text{Mn}_{2-x}\text{Ni}_x\text{O}_4$ and $\text{Li}_y\text{Mn}_{2-x}\text{Co}_x\text{O}_4$, where y can vary from 0 to 2.

5 The fine battery powders according to the present invention include particles having a small average particle size. The preferred average size of the particles will vary according to the particular application of the powder and the present invention advantageously provides the ability to carefully control the average particle size. Generally, the weight average particle size of the battery particles is at least about 0.05 μm and preferably is at least about 0.1 μm , such as at least about 0.3 μm . Further, the average particle size is preferably not greater than about 20 μm . For most applications, the weight average particle size is more preferably not greater than about 10 μm and even more preferably is not greater than about 5 μm . A particularly preferred average particle size is from about 1 μm to about 5 μm .

10 It is also possible according to the present invention to provide a fine battery powder batch having a bimodal particle size distribution. That is, the powder batch can include battery particles having two distinct and different average particle sizes. A bimodal particle size distribution can enhance the packing efficiency of the powder which is important for use as a battery electrode.

15 According to one preferred embodiment of the present invention, the powder batch of fine battery particles has a narrow particle size distribution, such that the majority of particles are about the same size. A narrow size distribution is particularly advantageous for applications wherein the powder is applied in a flowable medium, such as a paste. Preferably, at least about 80 weight percent and more preferably at least about 90 weight percent of the particles are not larger than twice the weight average particle size. Thus, 25 when the average particle size is about 2 μm , it is preferred that at least about 80 weight percent of the particles are not larger than 4 μm and it is more preferred that at least about 90 weight percent of the particles are not larger than 4 μm . Further, it is preferred that at least about 80 weight percent and more preferably at least about 90 weight percent of the 30 particles are not larger than about 1.5 times the weight average particle size. Thus, when

the average particle size is about 2 μm , it is preferred that at least about 80 weight percent of the particles are not larger than 3 μm and it is more preferred that at least about 90 weight percent of the particles are not larger than 3 μm .

Powders produced by the processes described herein, particularly those that have experienced a post treatment step, generally exist as soft agglomerates of primary spherical particles. It is well known to those in the art that micrometer-sized particles often form soft agglomerates as a result of their relatively high surface energy, as compared to larger particles. It is also known to those skilled in the art that such soft agglomerates may be dispersed easily by treatments such as exposure to ultrasound in a liquid medium or sieving. The average particle size and particle size distributions described herein are measured by mixing samples of the powders in a medium such as water with a surfactant and a short exposure to ultrasound through either an ultrasonic bath or horn. The ultrasonic treatment supplies sufficient energy to disperse the soft agglomerates into primary spherical particles. The primary particle size and size distribution is then measured by light scattering in a Microtrac instrument. This provides a good measure of the useful dispersion characteristics of the powder because this simulates the dispersion of the particles in a liquid medium such as a paste or slurry that is used to deposit the particles in a device, such as a battery. Thus, the references to particle size herein refer to the primary particle size, such as after lightly dispersing the soft agglomerates of particles.

Further, it is advantageous according to the present invention that the foregoing description of the average size and size distribution of the particles also applies to the intermediate precursor particles that are produced during the pyrolyzation step. That is, the size and size distribution of the particles changes very little, if at all, during the heat treatment step after pyrolyzation. The morphological properties of the final battery powder are substantially controlled by the properties of the intermediate precursor particles.

The fine battery particles of the present invention comprise of a number of crystallites. A battery material having a high crystallinity, i.e. large average crystallite size,

can enhance the electrical properties of batteries formed from the fine battery powder.

Thus, according to one embodiment of the present invention, it is preferred that the average crystallite size is such that the particles include relatively large crystallites. According to this embodiment, the average crystallite size is preferably at least about 20
5 nanometers, more preferably is at least about 30 nanometers, even more preferably is at least about 40 nanometers, and most preferably is at least about 50 nanometers. In one embodiment, the average crystallite size is at least about 100 nanometers. Fine battery powders having such high crystallinity can advantageously have enhanced electrical properties as compared to fine battery powders having lower crystallinity, i.e., a smaller
10 average crystallite size. The method of the present invention advantageously permits control over the crystallinity of the material by controlling the reaction temperature and/or residence time.

The fine battery particles produced according to the present invention also have a high degree of purity and it is preferred that the particles include not greater than about 0.1
15 atomic percent impurities and more preferably not greater than about 0.01 atomic percent impurities. Since no milling of the particles is required to achieve small average particle sizes, there are substantially no undesired impurities such as alumina, zirconia or high carbon steel in the powder batch.

For many applications it is desirable to have battery particles produced with a well
20 controlled high porosity. Such particles can advantageously also be produced according to the present invention. Battery powders having a high degree of open (accessible) porosity can advantageously form a battery having a high discharge rate.

The fine battery particles according to a preferred embodiment of the present invention are also substantially spherical in shape. That is, the particles are not jagged or
25 irregular in shape. Spherical particles are particularly advantageous because they are able to disperse more readily in a paste or slurry and impart advantageous flow characteristics to the paste of slurry compositions.

As is discussed above, it is desirable to provide fine battery powders having an increased surface area and a high degree of open (accessible) porosity.

30 In addition, the powder batches of fine battery particles according to the present

invention are substantially unagglomerated, that is, they include substantially no hard agglomerates of particles. Hard agglomerates are physically coalesced lumps of two or more particles that behave as one large particle. Hard agglomerates are disadvantageous in most applications of the battery powders. It is preferred that no more than about 1.0 weight percent of the fine battery particles in the powder batch of the present invention are in the form of hard agglomerates. More preferably, no more than about 0.5 weight percent of the particles are in the form of hard agglomerates. In the event that the powder does include hard agglomerates, such hard agglomerates can be removed by, for example, jet-milling the powder.

The fine battery powder batches according to the present invention are useful in a number of applications and can be used to fabricate a number of novel devices and intermediate products. Such devices and intermediate products are included within the scope of the present invention.

The fine battery powders of the present invention are particularly useful in electrocatalytic devices, such as batteries. One such application of the fine battery powders according to the present invention is in the field of batteries. For example, the fine battery powders are particularly advantageous for use in the electrodes of a lithium ion battery.

The battery powders are typically deposited onto device surfaces or substrates by a number of different deposition methods which involve the direct deposition of the dry powder such as dusting, electrophotographic or electrostatic precipitation, while other deposition methods involve liquid vehicles such as ink jet printing, liquid delivery from a syringe, micro-pens, toner, slurry deposition, paste-based methods and electrophoresis. In all these deposition methods, the powders described in the present invention show a number of distinct advantages over the powders produced by other methods. For example, small, spherical, narrow size distribution particles are more easily dispersed in liquid vehicles, they remain dispersed for a longer period and allow printing of smoother and finer features compared to powder made by alternative methods.

One way of applying such powders to a substrate is through the use of a thick-film paste. In the thick film process, a viscous paste that includes a functional particulate phase

(e.g. a fine battery powder) is screen printed onto a substrate. More particularly, a porous screen fabricated from stainless steel, polyester, nylon or similar inert material is stretched and attached to a rigid frame. A predetermined pattern is formed on the screen corresponding to the pattern to be printed. For example, a UV sensitive emulsion can be
5 applied to the screen and exposed through a positive or negative image of the design pattern. The screen is then developed to remove portions of the emulsion in the pattern regions.

The screen is then affixed to a screen printing device and the thick film paste is deposited on top of the screen. The substrate to be printed is then positioned beneath the
10 screen and the paste is forced through the screen and onto the substrate by a squeegee that traverses the screen. Thus, a pattern of traces and/or pads of the paste material is transferred to the substrate. The substrate with the paste applied in a predetermined pattern is then subjected to a drying and firing treatment to solidify and adhere the paste to the substrate.

Thick film pastes have a complex chemistry and generally include a functional phase, a binder phase and an organic vehicle phase. The functional phase include the fine battery powders of the present invention which provide conductivity. The binder phase can be, for example, a mixture of metal oxide or glass frit powders. PbO based glasses are commonly used as binders. The function of the binder phase is to control the sintering of
15 the film and assist the adhesion of the functional phase to the substrate and/or assist in the sintering of the functional phase. Reactive compounds can also be included in the paste to promote adherence of the functional phase to the substrate.

Thick film pastes also include an organic vehicle phase that is a mixture of solvents, polymers, resins and other organics whose main function is to provide the appropriate
25 rheology (flow properties) to the paste. The liquid solvent assists in mixing of the components into a homogenous paste and substantially evaporates upon application of the paste to the substrate. Usually the solvent is a volatile liquid such as methanol, ethanol, terpineol, butyl carbitol, butyl carbitol acetate, aliphatic alcohols, esters, acetone and the like. The other organic vehicle components can include thickeners (sometimes
30 referred to as organic binders), stabilizing agents, surfactants, wetting agents and the like.

Thickeners provide sufficient viscosity to the paste and also acts as a binding agent in the unfired state. Examples of thickeners include ethyl cellulose, polyvinyl acetates, resins such as acrylic resin, cellulose resin, polyester, polyamide and the like. The stabilizing agents reduce oxidation and degradation, stabilize the viscosity or buffer the pH of the paste. For example, triethanolamine is a common stabilizer. Wetting agents and surfactants are well known in the thick film paste art and can include triethanolamine and phosphate esters.

The different components of the thick film paste are mixed in the desired proportions in order to produce a substantially homogenous blend wherein the functional phase is well dispersed throughout the paste. Typically, the thick film paste will include from about 5 to about 95 weight percent such as from about 60 to 85 weight percent, of the functional phase, including the fine battery powders of the present invention.

Examples of thick film pastes are disclosed in U.S. Patent Nos. 4,172,733; 3,803,708; 4,140,817; and 3,816,097 all of which are incorporated herein by reference in their entirety.

Some applications of thick film pastes require higher tolerances than can be achieved using standard thick-film technology, as is described above. As a result, some thick film pastes have photo-imaging capability to enable the formation of lines and traces with decreased width and pitch. In this type of process, a photoactive thick film paste is applied to a substrate substantially as is described above. The paste can include, for example, a liquid vehicle such as polyvinyl alcohol, that is not cross-linked. The paste is then dried and exposed to ultraviolet light through a photomask to polymerize the exposed portions of paste and the paste is developed to remove unwanted portions of the paste. This technology permits higher density lines and features to be formed. The combination of the foregoing technology with the battery powders of the present invention permits the fabrication of devices with higher resolution and tolerances as compared to conventional technologies using conventional powders.

In addition, a laser can be used instead of ultraviolet light through a mask. The laser can be scanned over the surface in a pattern thereby replacing the need for a mask. The laser light is of sufficiently low intensity that it does not heating the glass or polymer above

its softening point. The unirradiated regions of the paste can be removed leaving a pattern. Likewise, conventional paste technology utilizes heating of a substrate to remove the vehicle from a paste and to fuse particles together or modify them in some other way. A laser can be used to locally heat the paste layer and scanned over the paste layer
5 thereby forming a pattern. The laser heating is confined to the paste layer and drives out the paste vehicle and heats the powder in the paste without appreciably heating the substrate. This allows heating of particles, delivered using pastes, without damaging a glass or even polymeric substrate.

Other deposition methods for the battery powders can also be used. For example,
10 a slurry method can be used to deposit the powder. The powder is typically dispersed in an aqueous slurry including reagents such as potassium silicate and polyvinyl alcohol, which aids in the adhesion of the powder to the surface. For example, the slurry can be poured onto the substrate and left to settle to the surface. After the powder has sedimented onto the substrate the supernatant liquid is decanted off and the powder layer
15 is left to dry.

Battery particles can also be deposited electrophoretically or electrostatically. The particles are charged and are brought into contact with the substrate surface having localized portions of opposite charge. The layer is typically lacquered to adhere the particles to the substrate. Shadow masks can be used to produce the desired pattern on
20 the substrate surface.

Ink-jet printing is another method for depositing the powders in a predetermined pattern. The powder is dispersed in a liquid medium and dispensed onto a substrate using an ink jet printing head that is computer controlled to produce a pattern. The powders of the present invention having a small size, narrow size distribution and spherical
25 morphology can be printed into a pattern having a high density and high resolution. Other deposition methods utilizing a battery powder dispersed in a liquid medium include micro-pen or syringe deposition, wherein the powders are dispersed and applied to a substrate using a pen or syringe and are then allowed to dry.

Patterns can also be formed by using an ink jet or micropen (small syringe) to
30 dispense sticky material onto a surface in a pattern. Powder is then transferred to the

sticky regions. This transfer can be done in several ways. A sheet covered with powder can be applied to the surface with the sticky pattern. The powder sticks to the sticky pattern and does not stick to the rest of the surface. A nozzle can be used to transfer powder directly to the sticky regions.

- 5 Many methods for directly depositing materials onto surfaces require heating of the particles once deposited to sinter them together and densify the layer. The densification can be assisted by including a molecular precursor to a material in the liquid containing the particles. The particle/molecular precursor mixture can be directly written onto the surface using ink jet, micro-pen, and other liquid dispensing methods. This can be followed by
10 heating in a furnace or heating using a localized energy source such as a laser. The heating converts the molecular precursor into the functional material contained in the particles thereby filling in the space between the particles with functional material.

Thus, the battery powders produced according to the present invention result in smoother powder layers when deposited by such liquid or dry powder based deposition
5 methods. Smoother powder layers are the result of the smaller average particle size, spherical particle morphology and narrower particle size distribution compared to powders produced by other methods.

EXAMPLES

The following example demonstrates the preparation of fine battery particles according to the present invention.

1.08 grams of $\text{Mn}(\text{NO}_3)_2 \cdot 6\text{H}_2\text{O}$ (3.76×10^{-3} moles Mn) and 0.0494 grams LiOH (2.06×10^{-3} moles Li) were added to 15 ml water. Several drops of concentrated HNO_3 was then added and the solution was stirred to dissolve the LiOH. The solution was atomized with an ultrasonic transducer and the aerosol droplets were carried in 3 liters per minute of air through a virtual impactor to remove droplets having a size greater than about $10 \mu\text{m}$. The droplets were then passed through a heated tube furnace at a temperature of 675°C .

The resulting particles had a composition of $\text{Li}_{1.1}\text{Mn}_2\text{O}_4$ and an average particle size of about $1.1 \mu\text{m}$ with a narrow size distribution.